

# Shenandoah National Park

## The Skyline Drive and the Appalachian Trail<sup>1</sup>

By

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SHENANDOAH, the latest unit in the ever-increasing chain of national parks, officially came into existence in December, 1935. Two of its features—the Skyline Drive and a newly constructed section of The Appalachian Trail—present novel features. An appraisal of resulting conditions may be of value to outing clubs in the East. Well-informed discussion of the situation should develop fuller appreciation of the views of various groups—perhaps conflicting—so that all opinions will be adequately represented in formulating plans for public reservations in the future.

It is not intended in this article to discuss whether skyline drives or their most recent phase, "parkways," are desirable along the Blue Ridge Mountains or elsewhere. The Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park is an accomplished fact, which came into existence overnight as an emergency project, and must be accepted just as is any other physical feature along the route. Whether such projects are advantageous to plan elsewhere must be determined by local conditions, such as the terrain—perhaps ridge crest, perhaps broken mountainous country where both trail and road can be located to advantage; by whether the land is in Federal or private ownership; and particularly by the possibility of the destruction following intensive lumbering, which is the ultimate end of most privately owned timber lands.

The northern end of the Blue Ridge is a narrow ridge crest, commencing in southern Pennsylvania and trending almost uni-

<sup>1</sup>The December, 1935, issue of *Appalachia* carried an article on the Appalachian Trail in Shenandoah National Park. In view of expressions by those familiar with the region that this article had created an erroneous impression, it was felt that opportunity should be afforded for a presentation of an opposite point of view. *Appalachia*, therefore, here presents an appraisal of the situation by officers of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. Since both points of view have been expressed in these two articles, no further publication on this question will appear in *Appalachia*.

formly southwestwardly for five hundred miles to where the Roanoke River breaks through the range. The Shenandoah National Park occupies an eighty-mile section about ninety miles west from Washington. The topography of the Blue Ridge must be carefully borne in mind in appraising the highway and trail problem. The range is the result of a very old overthrust broken off to the west, resulting, on the east, in long valleys leading up to the crest, and on the west in an extraordinarily continuous abrupt escarpment. This escarpment—with the location of the new trail along it—is a most important feature of the new development. From the ridge crest wooded areas extend east and west for distances varying from four to ten miles.

Land for the new park was first acquired by the State of Virginia by a long process of gifts and appropriations, further delayed by prolonged litigation. Toward the end of this process, the construction of the Skyline Drive in the park area was authorized practically without notice; no opportunity was afforded for discussion of the general advisability of the undertaking. It was premised as a drought relief measure for Virginia in 1931 and was suggested to the President by the then Director of the Virginia Conservation and Development Commission. It was finished before the Government took over the park.

Later, Congressional representatives of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia proposed, as a Public Works project, the continuation of this road to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This also was authorized by the President; the route was designated by the Secretary of the Interior. Known as the Blue Ridge Parkway,<sup>2</sup> this road extension parallels the Appalachian Trail as far as the Virginia-North Carolina line. Beyond, for a distance of three hundred miles to the Great Smokies, their routes are far separated.

The original Appalachian Trail through the Shenandoah National Park area was constructed as a purely amateur trail project by the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club between 1927 and 1931, during which time the Club membership increased from fifty to three hundred. In judging the route adopted it

<sup>2</sup>The status and the pending construction of this Parkway and the sections now under construction are reported in *Letter Report No. 3* to the Board of Managers, Appalachian Trail Conference, January 15, 1936, by Myron H. Avery, Chairman of the Board. At the request of the Appalachian Trail Conference, the Public Works Administration has authorized the rebuilding of any sections of the Appalachian Trail obliterated in southern Virginia by the proposed Blue Ridge Parkway.

must be realized that in its efforts to carry forward the Appalachian Trail, the Club was maintaining two hundred and sixty miles of main trail, extending from the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania to the southern end of the Shenandoah Park area. When road construction advanced, the Club attempted to reconstruct the old trail where obliterated. However, with the location of three camps in the Park, the C. C. C. undertook the construction of a through trail. It is this work by the C. C. C., under National Park Service direction, that constitutes the existing foot trail, the subject of discussion here. The Trail Club has continued to cooperate with the National Park Service in measuring, marking the route with Appalachian Trail markers, and preparing guidebook data, but the maintenance and condition of the route rest with Federal authorities. Particularly in the northern section of the Park, the Club continues to maintain a very extensive system of side trails, radiating out from the trunk-line trail along the ridges and into the canyons and valleys down to the highways below.

The narrow ridge aspect of Shenandoah National Park, with its abrupt western slope, has already been mentioned. Only two major highways cross the eighty-mile long Park area, at Thornton Gap on the Lee Highway and thirty-four miles farther south at Swift Run Gap. Traveling the northern section of the Park, from Chester Gap to Thornton Gap, originally involved an unbroken twenty-four mile walk of considerable difficulty. Eight miles south of Thornton Gap is Skyland, a recreational center for over a quarter of a century. Because of its accommodations and accessibility, the Skyland region was well patronized. Because of its complete inaccessibility, very few ever traveled the region for fifty miles south of Skyland, with the exception of work parties which annually made difficult and laborious trips to keep the marking intact. The old trail crossed the major summits along the route but at only a few places reached the edge of the escarpment, where outlooks existed. Reasons for the location of the old trail are well-known to those who helped to make it and are familiar with the conditions under which it was developed. It was cleared entirely by Club members on week-end trips. Old wood roads with connecting links cut through the woods had to be utilized as far as possible. The result was a route at times wandering and circuitous, without viewpoints, which could be improved by relocation in the course of time.

The Blue Ridge presents a problem in trail maintenance unappreciated by those not familiar with the Southern Appalachians. Because of heavy rainfall and high temperature the summer growth is very prolific and there is constant difficulty in keeping trails open in the wooded sections. Blackberry, scrub oak, and locusts with their thorns, largely unknown in the north woods, are found in profusion, and maintenance is a serious problem. Trails cut in April, if not used or cleared during the summer, are indistinguishable by August. This condition necessarily results in emphasis on the marking of the route to offset this prolific growth. The scheme of using paint blazes on the entire Appalachian Trail can be traced back to the maintenance problem in the Blue Ridge.

The reconstructed route is a graded trail for horseback and foot travel. So far this combination has not presented the problem found in some of the northern states; if it arises, it may call for a separation of routes. The trail is built according to National Park Service standards with a maximum grade of 15 per cent except on short pitches, and is the type of trail long used in the western national parks. No blazes or markings are permitted except Appalachian Trail markers; intersections are marked by signs. Every effort is made to preserve naturalness, except in the work on the footway. This construction has been criticized as too "artificial" in character, a criticism which raises the question of the requisites of a trail. Perhaps we are getting old, but we do not consider it essential to a true trail to have to step from rock to rock, over every fallen log, or to scramble down a talus slope, watching the ground all the while to avoid falls, or a sprained ankle or broken leg. Relinquishing this eighty-mile stretch to the National Park Service has afforded the seventy-odd overseers who maintain the Club's trails an opportunity to improve the remaining sections; their problems are too constant and pressing to leave time to lament that one section of our route is too good.

After all, graded trail, even in the East, is not a new undertaking. The new Appalachian Trail in Shenandoah National Park resembles in many respects the Edmands Path below Mt. Pleasant, and one of us recalls very distinctly what a relief it was to come out on this path one stormy afternoon almost twenty years ago. Professor Edmands paved a portion of the Gulfside between Mts. Jefferson and Adams, without criticism

that he was making mountain travel too easy. Both the Appalachian Trail and the Skyline Drive are new, and still show some of the rawness of construction. With the rapid growth in the Virginia Blue Ridge, these scars will soon be obliterated. Many miles of this trail are less than a year old but much of the so-called "artificial" aspect has already disappeared, as moss has covered the footway and the growth of bushes at the sides conceals construction. Last year, due to summer growth, walkers got lost along the overgrown route along the most traveled section, north of Skyland. It is hard to believe, when a trail must be cleared twice a year, as the National Park Service maintenance plan requires, that this "artificiality" will long remain a serious problem. The artificial character of the Edmands Path, so conspicuous originally, has not been visible for many years.

One striking contrast between the old and the new trails lies in the absence of views along the old and the constant succession of breath-taking panoramas from the new route. Perhaps there is a lesson in trail location, hitherto unperceived, to be gained from the Shenandoah situation. Possibly, because of its own slogan as a skyline route, builders of the Appalachian Trail have invariably followed the crestline without exploring the possibilities of some route formula presenting other advantages. The Shenandoah situation has demonstrated that the relocated trail along the rim of the escarpment presents paramount scenic attractions, with a complete sense of isolation.

The recently announced standards of a group whose aim is wilderness preservation, which probably represents the ultimate of this point of view, condemn all graded trails. This disapproval necessarily includes such trails as the Edmands Path, Forest Service trails in the White, Green, and Southern Appalachian Mountains, and many old wood roads which, in fair state of preservation and well cleared, form admirable trail routes. No other criticism of such trails has been heard. Such criticism would affect about 75% of the present Appalachian Trail system.

A recent letter of Dr. H. W. Tyler, former President of the Appalachian Mountain Club, sets forth his impressions of the Virginia region:

"Coming to Washington after many years in New England, I was particularly attracted to those sections of the

Maine-to-Georgia trail relatively accessible from Washington and have sampled it at several points before the boulevard was built. It has seemed to me that, in comparison with the trails in New England and other mountain trails of my acquaintance, the Blue Ridge path for hiking purposes was rather tame and, therefore, not necessarily to be preserved against more prosaic uses. Moreover, the most picturesque sections of the whole region seemed to me to lie in the lateral valleys and ridges rather than along the main axis of the range. The unaided pedestrian would have no easy access to these side valleys and ridges on account of the distances involved and the remoteness from buses.

"The construction of the axial boulevard, on the other hand, makes it possible for the pedestrian, with the aid of a car, to explore the more attractive localities where trails will, as time passes, be considerably developed."

The fact is that the motor highway has created new opportunities for exploration of the interesting features east and west along its eighty-mile crestline. It is now possible to spend every week end for two years on overnight walking trips in the Park and never duplicate the territory covered.

The same viewpoint is expressed in a letter by Mr. Harlan P. Kelsey, another former President of the Appalachian Mountain Club, well-known as an authority on the Appalachian Mountains:

"The Appalachian Trail through the Shenandoah National Park and the Long Trail in the Green Mountains in Vermont were in many cases badly located and of course very poorly constructed and maintained. The theory of maintaining the wilderness wherever we can is of course a just and sound one. Fair bounds must be struck between the almost fanatical enthusiast for the wilderness and those who believe that in some instances in our national parks and other public reservations some of the finest things should be made available for many thousands of people who cannot reach these beauty spots on foot. Such highways must be carefully restricted but by no means should they be done away with entirely.

"There are people who could not otherwise see them were these roads not built, who will be the chief defenders of our

conservation program in America in the future. The Appalachian Trail has hundreds of miles of location where they will not be bothered at all by automobile highways. The Shenandoah is a very narrow park at best and it was inevitable that to serve both groups who have a right to use the park some compromise was inevitable.

More than this, the National Park Service is building a type of trail which is infinitely superior to the old novice trail which it supersedes. I have climbed mountains all my life and am firmly convinced that a well-built trail adds extremely to the pleasure of the pedestrian. If a bungled trail is better than a well-built trail, then no trail at all would be still better."

With the whole outdoor world on rubber-tired wheels, the creation of Shenandoah National Park made some road building inevitable. It was hardly to be expected that Virginia would donate land worth more than a million dollars for a national park with the region inaccessible to her citizens, other than a very small group of trampers with the necessary strength and energy to go where others could not penetrate. Although the newest of the national parks, and still in the development stage, in 1935 more than 611,000 people visited its confines—100,000 *more than any other national park*. The plan of the National Park Service is to tie in the trails and other developments with the Skyline Drive. Trails lead off from it, hence the numerous connections between the drive and trails which permit short trips from cars parked on the highway, fostering an interest in further exploration. Every effort is made to attract attention to the trails—by signs, the distribution of literature, talks, and otherwise. C. C. C. boys stationed at information booths at various points along the highway have been supplied with trail maps and data and regularly suggest to inquirers walks of from four to eight miles along various sections of the trail. The new trail in the Shenandoah National Park has stimulated appreciable new interest in the use of trails.

It is sometimes urged that the wilderness aspect is lost on **over-used trails**. But use is a criterion for the justification of **routes**. For instance, the small use accorded the spectacular and **highly scenic** but inaccessible Mahoosuc Range Trail has raised

frequent questions in the Appalachian Mountain Club as to whether the expense of its construction and maintenance is justified. Just as there are two schools of thought in judging the situation in Shenandoah National Park, so there are diverging points of view as to the degree of use of forest and wilderness areas. One policy would restrict the use of these areas to the very limited few who possess the physical ability and the freedom from confining duties to utilize them afoot. The other would regard such areas as a common trust, wherein a greater number should have the opportunity to obtain such benefits as their facilities permit, and where there should be stimulated an impulse on the part of city dwellers to participate in their pleasures and benefits. To regard either policy unqualifiedly right or wrong requires a somewhat dogmatic confidence in one's measure of values.

Apart from skyline drives, the automobile has had tremendous and growing effect on the use of trails. The Tuckerman Ravine Trail is a striking example. Not many years ago this was only a mountain trail. With the increasing string of tourists being disgorged at Pinkham Notch, together with the girls' and boys' camps, the Tuckerman Ravine Trail threatens to rival St. Mark's Square in Venice, "where sooner or later one meets everybody." Those who delight in solitary contemplation of mountains and woods, *permitted only to themselves*, may rail against the present condition on the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, but what can be done about it? Would it be feasible for the Forest Service to put a gate across this trail and admit persons only in small groups and with a definite limitation on the number per hour? Shall motor access to it be shut off?

The same apprehension might be felt in connection with the newest phenomenon in outdoor recreation—the throngs now using the recently built ski trails. The astonishing increase in construction of steeply pitched trails from formerly wooded summits—100 miles in two years in New Hampshire alone—with the serious problems of possible future erosion in a slash as wide as road construction, might likewise evoke protestations. That outing clubs have found nothing objectionable in these invasions, including plans for funiculars, inevitably raises the suggestion that opening of the wilderness is perhaps not so much a matter of principle as a matter of who benefits or loses thereby.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Skiing has come to the Blue Ridge and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club program contemplates ski trails.

Moreover, trail standards are relative. Some perhaps regret that change must come, that nothing is constant. The poor condition of the Webster Cliff Trail several years ago may be recalled. It was narrow, more or less overgrown, had blind spots. When this condition was mentioned to one of the Councilors of the Appalachian Mountain Club, he made the comment that the Webster Cliff Trail represented the standard of twenty years before. In trail making, as in all other activities, progress and improvement are inevitable; time marches on.

Returning to the Appalachian Trail in Shenandoah National Park, we might set up a fair balance sheet of debits and credits of the relocated graded trail somewhat as follows: Against proximity of trail to Skyline Drive in the gaps and narrowest sections of the ridge, credit the fact that by far the greater part of the trail is distant beyond sight and sound of the road, whereas proximity in the gaps and the connecting links affords opportunity for walks of from four to eight miles, with the exception of three one-mile units. Against noise, sight, and smell of automobiles (the whistle of trains on the railroad through the Shenandoah Valley could always be heard along the ridge crest), credit the ameliorating fact that this objection applies only to gaps and trail crossings, and that most of the travel on the Drive occurs in summer, when the trail is least used. Against overcrowding of the region, which in the last analysis means the utilization of outdoor facilities by people hitherto unable to reach them, the obvious counter credit is the wholesome democratic doctrine of The Greatest Good to the Greatest Number. It must not be forgotten that the particular region under discussion is *in public ownership as a national park*; to the deprivation of some and the gain of many, it has forever been removed from the realm of the solitudinarian. Finally, against any other debits that may be conceived of (and many doubtless can be), there may well be credited the elimination of ten miles of hard dirt road from the pre-existing route, the development of a continuous system of well-maintained shelters, open and closed, along eighty miles, at Government expense, far beyond the ability of the Trail Club to provide or maintain; assured standard maintenance of the route, also at Government expense; and vastly enhanced scenic attractiveness. To many, the resulting balance will not appear in very vivid red.